

The Great Commitments at Berea College - GSTR 210

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Since the earliest days of Berea College, the institution has attempted to summarize its essential values and mission. Early publicity literature recounted the many adversities overcome by the founding generation to build up a school that would be open to all persons, offering labor as a means of support, and operating under “an influence strictly Christian.” E. Henry Fairchild, Berea’s first president (1869-1889), noted in his inaugural address that Berea College welcomed all persons, regardless of race or gender. He further observed that Berea was “a school for the poor,” declaring that “All possible pains will be taken to make expenses low, and to furnish the means of self-support.” The college would also strive to be “thoroughly religious” while avoiding sectarianism. Students could also expect lively teaching and instruction. “The most perfectly free discussion will be encouraged on all important subjects, but the teachers will feel under no obligation to be neutral on any subject.” ¹ During the administration of Berea President William Goodell Frost (1892-1920), professors, teachers, and other workers were invited to sign a commission which outlined the purposes of the college as well as the duties of the staff member. Among these intentions were “to place spiritual life above everything else” and declaring that the college had “undertaken a distinctive work for those who are most in need of Christian education.” Teachers were encouraged to exhibit loyalty to the institution by understanding the rules of the college and being faithful in their academic preparations. Teachers were also reminded that “the personal influence and example of workers is even more important than their classroom or technical work.” Yet for all these declarations, years would pass before Berea offered a summary set of principles defining the college’s mission.

Berea College’s [Great Commitments](#) emerged at the suggestion of former academic dean Louis Smith. Formulated by Smith in consultation with President Francis S. Hutchins (1939-67) in 1962, the Commitments appeared as part of a grant application to the Ford Foundation entitled Profile of Berea College, 1952-1972. The primary intent of the Commitments was to provide a concise statement of the historic aims and purposes of Berea College. In 1968, President Willis D. Weatherford, Jr. used the Commitments as the organizing structure of his first presidential report. In 1969, the General Faculty ratified a revised form of the Commitments and these were

adopted by the Trustees later the same year. Weatherford declared that the special aims of the college would keep Berea unique and prevent the institution from drifting “into congruence with all other colleges into a common mediocrity.” In 1972, Louis Smith published his commentary on the Commitments in his *The Great Commitments of Berea College*.²

The Commitments have appeared in various forms with commentary in the Self-Study Reports of 1962-63, 1972-73, and 1983-84. The “Whom Shall We Serve” Committee (1980) reviewed aspects of the Commitments in relation to low-income student admissions standards and extending Berea’s admissions territory. In 1983-84, the Self-Study Committee conducted a survey of Bereans—students, alumni, faculty/staff, and trustees—in order to examine the College’s effectiveness in fulfilling the Commitments. The survey revealed concerns about potential conflict within and among the Commitments. Weatherford expressed the view that the Commitments had an essential unity.

“The Appalachian and interracial commitments both represent service to groups of special need,” Weatherford observed, “The interracial commitment grows out of Christ’s view of persons as children of God. Liberal learning and learning through work experience are complementary avenues of educating the whole person. Liberal learning affirms the importance of values for noble living and Christian education gives direction to the search for values, but, as practiced at Berea, leaves freedom for rational inquiry.” Weatherford again used the Commitments to organize his final president’s report in 1984.³

During the administration of John B. Stephenson (1984-94), a review of the general education curriculum in 1991-92 prompted a review of the Great Commitments. David Swanson, chairman of Berea’s Board of Trustees; President Stephenson, and members of the General faculty, staff, and students—twenty-one people in all—formed the Committee to Review the Commitments (CRC), which began its review in September 1992. The CRC conducted surveys, held public forums, and reviewed historical documents in order to identify new ways for articulating Berea’s mission.⁴

Two significant changes in the text of the Great Commitments resulted from the CRC’s work. In considering the broader implications of Berea’s interracial mission, the CRC acknowledged the

educational needs of Native Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans in the Appalachian region.

The committee affirmed the “kinship of all peoples,” yet concluded that Berea’s history and location demanded a continued emphasis on promoting understanding between white and African-American students. “We believe that whatever we can do to improve relationships between any groups of people,” the CRC declared, “will encourage greater respect for and appreciation of all peoples and cultures.” Acknowledging the unity of Berea’s mission, the CRC changed the wording of the first commitment, “To provide an educational opportunity primarily for students from Appalachia, who have great promise and limited economic resources” to read “To provide an educational opportunity for students from Appalachia, black and white, who have great promise and limited economic resources.”⁵

The second important change reflected the committee’s concern that the college’s long history of educating women remained hidden. Educating women on an equal basis with men reflected the college’s historic commitment to equality and democracy, yet there was no obvious affirmation of this history in earlier versions of the Great Commitments. Fee and other founders were committed to coeducation and gender equality, an affirmation of human dignity and a rejection of social structures that promoted caste. Accordingly, the CRC used inclusive language to replace terms such as “brotherhood” and “mankind” with “kinship of all peoples” and “others.” The CRC boldly suggested an additional commitment, “To create a democratic environment dedicated to education and equality for women and men.” Since Berea had always asserted the education of women on an equal basis with men, the CRC observed, “To confront and challenge gender stereotypes requires a commitment that focuses on inclusion and understanding of women.” The CRC’s final report and the revised version of the Great Commitments were accepted by the Faculty and the Board of Trustees in 1993.⁶

The Great Commitments continue to inform Berea’s mission. The strategic planning process inaugurated by President Larry Shinn has sought new ways to carry on the work articulated in the Commitments into the 21st Century. The Commitments themselves remain open to new interpretations and innovative enterprise. “Throughout its long history, Berea College has been one persistent experiment in education and service,” Shinn observed in his inaugural address,

“Though faithful to its venerable traditions, Berea has always been open to the future and its requirements.”⁷

Notes

¹E. H. Fairchild, “Inaugural Address,” in *Inauguration of Rev. E. H. Fairchild, President of Berea College, Kentucky* (Cincinnati: Elm Street Printing, 1870), 14.

²Shannon H. Wilson, *Berea College: An Illustrated History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 174-75. (On-campus full-text access via [NetLibrary](#).) Also [378.769 W753b 2006](#).

³General Faculty Minutes, April 21, 1969 and September 8, 1969, General Faculty Records, Record Group (hereafter RG) 5.01, Berea College Archives (hereafter BCA).

⁴General and College Faculty Minutes, March 9, 1995, RG 6.01, College Faculty Records, BCA; Wilson, *Berea College*, 195. (On-campus full-text access via [NetLibrary](#).) Also [378.769 W753b 2006](#).

⁵“Recommendations from the General Faculty and Report of the Committee to Review the Commitments to the Board of Trustees, March 1993,” 9, 12-14, Committee to Review the Commitments files, RG 10, BCA (hereafter CRC Report); Wilson, *Berea College*, 197. (On-campus full-text access via [NetLibrary](#).) Also [378.769 W753b 2006](#).

⁶CRC Report, 9-10, 15; Wilson, *Berea College*, 197-98.(on-campus full-text access via [NetLibrary](#)) Also [378.769 W753b 2006](#).

⁷Larry D. Shinn, “The Challenge of Deep Learning,” *Berea Alumnus* 66 (1995): 12. See also Wilson, *Berea College*, 203-09. (On-campus full-text access via [NetLibrary](#).) Also [378.769 W753b 2006](#).

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